Presenting with PowerPoint

Once you have created your impactful, nearly wordless, visual masterpiece that is your PowerPoint slideshow, it's time to get ready to present it to the audience. While this may seem simple enough, there is more to do beyond just hooking your computer up to a projector to make sure your slideshow is delivered effectively.

Physically Introducing Visuals

Every visual that is on your slideshow should be there for a reason, which means that you should need to discuss each one directly. When you are directly commenting on a visual on the screen, it is important that you are physically right next it. Imagine each audience members' field of vision is like a camera frame: you should be in the same camera frame as any visual you are directly referencing. That way, your audience members are able to see both you and the image at the same time. Otherwise, if you are on the other side of the room, or are even a few steps away, the audience has to bounce their visual attention back and forth between you and the screen. Audience members shouldn't have to feel like they are spectating a tennis match right at the net line. Make it easy for them by standing right next to the visual aid as you discuss it.

When you are done discussing the visual on the screen, walk away from the screen a bit to keep your focus on the audience. Take a step toward them or work some movement in across the room. Avoid getting locked down near the screen or it may become too tempting for both you and the audience to keep looking at it.

Eye Contact

As always, eye contact is the most important nonverbal element of your presentation. Yet, when PowerPoint accompanies oral presentations, presenters start to struggle with giving their audience the eye contact they need. Like a moth to a flame, there is something about the light of the PowerPoint screen that seems to draw a presenter's gaze toward it. I have had many a student presenter look almost exclusively at the screen while presenting, even though there were no bullet points or words to read there.

When presenting with projected visual aids, the goal is to keep your gaze at the audience in front of you and only look back to the screen when it is truly necessary. When you need to introduce a new visual, walk up to the screen and stand with your back to it like a meteorologist reporting the weather. Keep your feet pointed toward your audience (perpendicular to the screen) so that you can keep your focus on your listeners, not on the pretty visuals you've compiled. When presenters let their feet move parallel to the screen (or, even worse, let them point right at it), they tend to stare at the visuals too often and too long. Broken eye contact with your audience and too much reliance on the slides hurts your credibility and hinders your connection with your listeners.

Controlling the Audience's Focus

As you previously read, you should try to control the audience's focus as much as possible when presenting visual evidence. This helps to ensure the audience fully comprehends the message you are saying and the images they are seeing. Thus, when you are presenting visuals—particularly those that

are more complicated, like diagrams or graphs—you need to highlight the specific areas you would like to discuss as you discuss them. If, for instance, you were presenting information on the different sections of Disney World's Magic Kingdom and the most popular rides in each "land," you should physically point out these different areas and attractions on an illustrated map (which qualifies as a diagram/illustration) as you talk about each one in the presentation.

The question then becomes *what is the best way to point out relevant areas of a visual to the audience*? The simplest way is to use your pointer finger and literally point to different parts of the image. Or, if you are worried that the image might still appear too complicated, you can use the Shapes function on PowerPoint to create circles, arrows, or other markings to highlight the areas you want to feature. Then, animate those markings to appear one at a time on click so you can control when they come on the screen. Make sure the markings are bright and contrast clearly from the rest of the graph or diagram so the audience can readily find them as you point them out with your finger.

Avoiding Slide Dependency

A common occurrence in PowerPoint presentations is that presenters seem somewhat surprised by their own slides (that is, they don't know what to talk about until the slide appears on the screen). They speak a little, take a long pause while they change the slide, and look at it for a moment before they start to talk about it. This is what we call **slide dependency**, and it can negatively impact both the audience's perception of the speaker's credibility and the conversational feel of the presentation. If you appear to be waiting for the slides to tell you what to say, it certainly does not seem as though you are the expert on the topic you are presenting.

Even presenters well acquainted with their slideshows can still fall prey to slide dependency. When PowerPoint is on the screen, presenters often seem to be locked down by their slides, getting chained to the progression of the visuals. They explain one slide and then—click—move to the next slide and explain what's on the screen. Then—click—they explain what's on the next screen, and they get stuck in this dull routine of just explaining visuals instead of conversing with the audience about the overall topic or the claim that the visuals should be proving.

There are two key ideas to help you avoid slide dependency. First, plan your message (the M of AIMC) *before* you plan your visual aids (the C for channel of AIMC). Then, find the visuals that best support what you plan to say. If there aren't appropriate visuals for some of the points you want to say aloud, that's okay. You can insert blank slides as needed.

Second, when presenting the slideshow, you need to talk *beyond* the slides. The visuals should only be the back-up singers to the presentation you are delivering; they should not be the stars of the show. When delivering your presentation, click to a slide only when you are ready to discuss that visual. Explain clearly to the audience what they are seeing and how it is relevant. Then, continue with the presentation to make the points you need to make. Walk up to the screen to introduce and discuss a new visual, and then walk away from the screen to continue talking beyond the images.

Maintaining a Conversational Tone and Feel

PowerPoint can proverbially suck the air out of the room. Presenters—especially those who are slide-dependent—tend to get more robotic when discussing visuals on a screen. Whatever freedom those presenters felt in a more fluid conversational style of presenting dissipates with the introduction of the

pre-planned slideshow. Yes, it is true that a carefully constructed PowerPoint can restrict presenters somewhat, but it should not bar presenters from having audience interaction and conversation.

Remember that regardless of what you are sharing on your screen, your audience should be your primary focus. Talk with your audience or work in ways to let them participate. Let the intent of your presentation (getting your audience to learn, feel, think, or do something) be in the forefront of your mind. Remember that your PowerPoint is a channel, the *last* consideration of AIMC; your audience should be the first.

Practice with the PowerPoint Slideshow

I cannot stress this enough: practice as a team with the PowerPoint slides. Make sure that you are all comfortable with the content of the slides, with the way each one looks, with who will change the slides when, and with where you will all stand in relation to the screen when you present. Work out all the technological and collaborative kinks *before* presentation day.

Additionally, the more familiar you are with the slides, the easier the guidelines mentioned in this article will become. You'll know how to interact with the visuals and how to describe where the audience should look. You'll be able to avoid slide dependency. You'll feel more at ease to speak conversationally. Most importantly, you'll be able to focus on your audience, not on the slides. After all, every part of the presentation—visuals included—is for them.